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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HABIT¹

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Many graduate nurses, I am sure, have never studied psychology from a text book, and have never heard a lecture on the subject, yet are expert practical psychologists. You know and apply, among other things, the laws of habit formation. You naturally ask, then, Why is it worth while for the nursing in training, already overburdened with many practical duties and a heavy curriculum, to take up the study of one more abstruse subject, especially when it is admitted that she would unconsciously learn a great deal of what psychology teaches, even if she were left to herself? My answer is that she may save time in the long run, that she may find a short-cut to knowledge which otherwise would take her long to gather in the school of experience, and that she herself, as well as her patients may, in the meantime, reap the benefit which comes through a knowledge of human nature.

One of the largest elements of this knowledge of human nature is an understanding of the part which habit plays in our lives and of the means we have at hand to direct this great force. Habit was called by some one second nature,—“Not second nature,” said the Duke of Wellington, “but ten times nature.” Since hearing in Dr. Forbes’ convincing paper of the great force which instincts exert, even in adult life, we may hesitate to claim for habit so large a distinction as that, but yet how tremendous and wide-spread is its force for evil and for good.

“How many habits do you suppose you have?” I often ask my students. “Since you have come into this room,” I say, “how many habits do you suppose you have exercised?” And after guesses of three, ten, thirty, and so on, we begin to enumerate them: coming to this room rather than to some other; walking to a particular seat, sitting down, feeling bored or interested according to how one usually feels when she comes to the psychology class; even thinking of certain things and in a certain way that belongs to this particular situation. And then we start to analyze some of these, as well as the tens or hundreds of others that might be mentioned: our walking, just how do we do that? we surely do not think about it often, no, it is habit which guides these movements; how do we move our arms? how push aside a chair? how form the letters and words and control the breathing in our speech?—not to mention the things we say, and the way we say

¹ Read at the seventeenth annual meeting of the New York State Nurses’ Association, Rochester, N. Y., December 5, 1918.

them, and to whom we say them, and on and on, ad infinitum. Even these suggestions refer only to one sort of habits—all these mentioned are *positive* habits of doing or feeling and thinking something. But we have many, many habits of a *negative* sort: *not* to run around the room, *not* to fidget and talk and pay attention to outside noises, are as truly learned habits, and are more truly opposed to our original nature, than are our individual idiosyncracies of the fiddling with a pencil and the like.

All these things the student easily sees she does without the present direction of consciousness, and they are things which, somehow or other, whether consciously or unconsciously, she has learned to do. Bad habits, she now sees, are not by any means her only equipment of habits. Whether she likes them or not, she has many habits—not tens of hundreds, but thousands and millions of them; ways in which she unconsciously meets situations because she has met them in that same way in the past. Since we have these habits—these many unconscious ways of reacting, it seems rather worth while to take some account of our stock in trade. Bad habits we all have. The sooner we recognize them, the better. The more we know of the strength of this impelling force, the better, for efforts cannot be too soon taken to counteract, with great difficulty now, what might have been accomplished with ease in childhood. The older we are, the harder it will be, for so many more repetitions have gone into the building of the habit, and each repetition has inevitably left its mark. But fortunately many, in fact, most of our habits, are not bad. Many, of course, are positively good, good in a moral sense—impelling us unconsciously to be kind and considerate, honest and true. Indeed the very foundation of our moral characters depends upon such habits. Alas for the nurse to whom another's possessions offer even the temptation to steal. Though she may resist, she does with strain what her companions accomplish easily and unconsciously through their habits of honesty. But after making our inventories of our decidedly good and bad habits, many apparently indifferent ones remain.

What about those unconscious ways of meeting life's detailed situations? Is it a good thing that we have many such habits? Certainly, yes. Every nurse knows that she makes a bed far more easily when she has reduced the doing of it to a habit. She does it better, she does it more quickly, and she saves valuable time. Each fold is put in at the proper place and time, but her consciousness is elsewhere. This matter of having habits, in order that we may save our consciousness for some other task, I feel should be impressed with great force upon nurses in training. To many of them the first few months in a

hospital bring a great disillusionment. These young women have come with high ideals of serving humanity, and they have found that their duties consist very largely in doing over and over again certain humdrum tasks. They know that these tasks are to be done, but they often fail to grasp the real reason why they must spend so much time and effort upon them and why the instructors insist so arbitrarily, as it often seems to the pupil, that *one* particular way of doing things shall always be adopted. If they knew more about the force and value of habit, much of their discontent, I think, would vanish. They would see that during this present grind, habits are being formed and made automatic not as ends in themselves, but so that the nurses' very high ideals of service may later be fulfilled. An untrained nurse at the bedside of a very sick person is held down to petty details by the necessity of giving all her attention to little things. The trained nurse, on the other hand, is one who does by habit (thus doing well and quickly and easily) many routine duties, and above all her consciousness is thus freed, so that she may meet the requirements of the present emergency, at the same time that these regular and necessary duties are being automatically taken care of by her habits. If the pupil nurse can thus look upon her time of habit-forming as a time of freedom-gaining for the future—as a time of preparation for the meeting of emergencies later on, perhaps a new value will attach to the humble task of packing soiled linen into a dirty pillow case, and she will see why it is worth while *always* to dispose of her linen in just this way, even though some other way may be just as good. The advantage attaches not only to this particular way of doing but to the fact that it is *always done in the same way*, for only through this routine of making the same movement, in the presence of a certain situation, will habits with their attendant benefits be attained.

Almost invariably my student nurses join with me in the plan of studying habit formation further by the method of actually forming a new habit in connection with the work in psychology. I never give this as a class requirement, for I believe that for such a plan to be effective, it must be done spontaneously, but it rarely happens that a nurse does not want to make the experiment. What shall the habit be? Each one chooses her own, but we discuss them at considerable length. There are all kinds of personal habits that are worth while having, and often one of these is chosen. Then there are, of course, the host of habits which so largely go to make up a nurse's professional efficiency. In this connection I beg them to consider the importance of learning from one another or discovering for themselves just what is the *most* efficient method of doing each minute task. I tell them about Gilbraith's work, that wonderful efficiency enquirer who

has contributed so much to America's labor output by devising means of teaching workmen to eliminate useless movements. Two hundred and fifty-six bricks are laid now, on an average, by a laborer, in the same length of time that it formerly took him to lay 140, because Gilbraith has shown that seven movements will accomplish what formerly was done with about eighteen movements,—and the resulting fatigue is less.

If I can judge from the questions which come to me from the nurses, there is no problem which bothers them so much as how they can do, in a limited time, all that they are supposed to do, and I take pleasure in citing to them illustrations from other fields in which marvelous time-saving has been accomplished through the combination of careful study for the elimination of waste movement, and diligent reducing of these best methods to a basis of habit.

In choosing to form a habit for illustrative study in the psychology class, I insist upon two points: first, that no one form a habit unless it has for her an intrinsic merit, unless she vitally feels its need and desires to form it. Aside from the fact that any other method would be a waste of time when so many habits have need of being formed, I make this requirement also, because of a great psychological principle. This principle is too often neglected by teachers of all subjects. They assume, often, that frequency of performance is the only factor necessary in creating habits. As a matter of fact, mere repetition alone has small power to create habit, when compared with *interested* and *attentive* repetition. If the doing of an act bring as its consequence some immediate satisfaction, that very fact itself aids in strengthening the habit. Since some of my students are head nurses, I call their attention in this connection to their dealings with pupils whom they direct. It is most necessary for them to realize how much they can aid in the forming of their pupils' habits by the simple expedient of seeing to it that pleasant results follow the performance of these habits when they are accomplished. A word of early commendation for a chance success, is often worth a pound of blame, later. To apply this helpfulness of the strengthening due to satisfying results to their own habits, it is necessary as I have said that they really desire to form the habit. Attentive interest, with the consequent attendance of satisfaction upon performing the habit, is an essential element of the best type of voluntary habit formation.

(To be continued)